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## READING HALL READING MARX

### Abstract

This essay introduces and highlights the significance of Stuart Hall's essay, 'Marx's Notes on Method: A "Reading" of the "1857 Introduction"' which follows. Hall's essay is a key text in understanding the theoretical work of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in the mid-1970s, specifically the Centre's engagement with Althusser. Hall's text sets the theoretical groundwork for the concept of articulation and raises important questions of method within cultural studies. It also represents an exemplary reading of Marx.

### Keywords

Hall, Stuart; Marx; method; epistemology; cultural studies; Althusser

**T**HE FOLLOWING ESSAY by Stuart Hall, 'Marx's Notes on Method: A "Reading" of the "1857 Introduction"', originally appeared in *Working Papers in Cultural Studies*, the 'house journal' (Hall, 1980a: 15) of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham in 1974. As Hall notes in his prefatory remarks, this is a shortened version of a Stencilled Occasional Paper that Hall wrote in 1973. It has been relatively unavailable since (except perhaps as a late generation photocopy from a graduate seminar in cultural studies, as my own copy is), and was not reprinted in the *WPCS* reader, *Culture, Media, Language* (Hall *et al.*, 1980).<sup>1</sup> So why reprint what Hall has referred to as his 'long, rambling essay' (1992: 280) now, 30 years later?

There are three reasons for its appearance here. First, it is a key text for understanding the theoretical work of the CCCS in the mid-1970s, specifically the Centre's engagement with Althusser.<sup>2,3</sup> Second, the essay lays the groundwork for the idea of articulation and spends time on the question of method, specifically what became known as the detour through theory. Third, the essay is an exemplary reading of a difficult text of Marx's and so may be useful in

discussions about the place of Marx in cultural studies today. Thus, we are not reprinting it as an act of pure disciplinary archaeology (*The Lost Texts of the CCCS!*). Nor are we claiming that full-blown cultural studies can be found, embryonically, in this text ('it's all here!'), a form of evolutionism that Marx actually critiques in the 1857 *Introduction*. As Hall writes, '[i]t is, of course, *not* a reading *tabula rasa*, not a reading "without presuppositions". It reflects my own problematic, inevitably' (1974: 133; hereafter I will refer to Hall's essay as MN). Through a close reading and explication of Marx, all the while carefully 'stak[ing] out the difference between structuralism in Marx's epistemology and Althusser's' (1992: 280), the essay begins to reveal Hall's problematic at the time, what Lawrence Grossberg (1997) has called the structural-conjunctural formation of cultural studies. Hall writes later that this essay 'was only the tip of the iceberg of this long engagement [with Althusser]' (1992: 280). This is the essay, vetted through the Theory seminar of the CCCS, where Hall begins to work out these ideas at length. The essay represents an argument that only appears in a sort of short hand afterwards. Hall refers back to the essay several times (1980a, 1980b, 1986a, 1992) but only in 'The Problem of Ideology: Marxism without Guarantees' (1986b) do we see aspects of this argument as anything more than a cursory citation.

Open any of the proliferating introductory volumes to cultural studies (e.g. Sardar and Van Loon, 1997; Baldwin *et al.*, 1999; Barker, 2000) and you will note the presence of Louis Althusser and of his views on ideology, interpellation and ISAs. They are regularly seen as important components of cultural studies' theoretical toolbox. However, the ready inclusion of Althusser's ideas belies the Centre's long struggle with these very same ideas (Hall writes, 'I remember wrestling with Althusser', 1992: 280). If we are to understand the Centre's uses of Althusser, for example in the long theoretical introductory essay in *Resistance Through Rituals* (1976), these struggles are important to keep in mind. Hall has staked out these debates elsewhere (1980a, 1980b, 1985; as have others, e.g. Clarke, 1991; Grossberg, 1997; Sparks, 1996), and so there is no need to rehearse them here.<sup>4</sup> But clearly Hall's later discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of structuralism (in Hall, 1980b, especially pp. 67–9) owes a great deal to this close reading of Marx. We see this in Hall's condensed discourse on the place of theory in Marx's method and later the idea of unity in difference that leads to articulation (both in Hall, 1980b).

This essay is perhaps the only place one finds an explicit discussion of method either in Marx or Hall. The idea of the detour through theory (usually missing from introductory texts to cultural studies) can be too easily simplified as: one starts with a situation, one develops or discovers theory which can help explain the situation, one then applies the theory to the situation. However, the method that Hall sets out in his reading of the *Introduction* is much more complex. First of all, one does not look for concepts in any essentialist, universalizing way, but, as Hall writes, one looks for concepts

which *differentiate* in the very moment that they reveal hidden connections. In much the same way, Marx observes that concepts which differentiate out what makes possible the specific development of different languages are more significant than 'abstracting' a few, simple, basic, common 'language universals'.

(MN: 137; emphasis in original)

The question of theory is a question of abstraction, but rather than becoming *more* abstract, one moves from the abstract (a general, simple idea) to the concrete (a highly differentiated, multiply determined idea). The concrete is not what is empirically given, but a necessary complexity. It is the result of theoretical work, not its origin. Take a concept and track its multiple material determinations and then you have the concrete. The process is not that of inserting philosophical abstractions into the 'here and now,' because that neglects these many determinations (1986c: 58). It is not about theory, but 'going on theorizing' (1986c: 60). However, the process of theorizing itself is always grounded in its historical conjuncture; thought presupposes society (MN: 150) and therefore is shaped by its own multiple material determinations.

The detour through theory involves the movement back and forth across varying levels of abstraction. Hall describes Marx's method as follows:

[I]n the examination of any phenomenon or relation, we must comprehend both its internal structure – what it is in its differentiatedness – as well as those other structures to which it is coupled and with which it forms some more inclusive totality. Both the specificities and the connections – the complex unities of structures – have to be demonstrated by the concrete analysis of concrete relations and conjunctions. . . . This method thus retains the concrete empirical reference as a privileged and undissolved 'moment' within a theoretical analysis without thereby making it 'empiricist': the concrete analysis of concrete situations.

(MN: 147)

This method has been utilized to the fullest extent in Hall *et al.*'s groundbreaking book, *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order* (1978), an exemplary attempt to trace the multiple material determinations of 'mugging' in Britain in the early 1970s. They explain:

There are, we argue, clear historical and structural forces at work in this period, shaping, so to speak, from the outside, the immediate transactions on the ground between 'muggers', potential muggers, their victims and their apprehenders. . . . It is to this shaping context, therefore, that we turn: attempting to make precise, without simplification or reduction, the other contradictory connections between specific events of a criminal-and-control kind, and the historical conjuncture in which they appear.

(1978: 185)

*Policing the Crisis* begins to offer a somewhat coherent framework more Gramscian than Althusserian, but the methodology of the project seems very close to that laid out in Hall's essay. It moves across varying levels of abstraction, but never loses sight of concrete situations. While pursuing conceptualizations of the state, crime, and deviancy, they never lose sight that 'some muggers *did* mug' (1978: 186), in other words, the concrete. This complex theoretical movement may explain what some – for example, Sparks (1996: 88) – see as a weakness of the book: that it does not work within any one particular theoretical framework. The establishment of such a framework, in the end, may not have been the point since that would ultimately privilege the abstract framework over the concrete analysis.

What is key here in staking out Hall's differences with Althusser's reading of Marx is that Althusser posits an 'impassable threshold' between thought and object (MN: 149), which Hall argues is a significant misreading of Marx's epistemology (see 1980b: 68). There is no absolute break between thought and reality (as Althusser would have it). Thought is the product 'of the working-up of observation and conception' (Marx quoted in MN: 150): 'Thought *always* has built into it the concrete substratum of the manner in which the category has been realized historically within the specific mode of production being examined' (MN: 151; emphasis in original). Never abandon the field to theory (thought) alone. This is paralleled in the conception of wholeness, the unity in difference. Unity in difference involves movement between thought and real relations. Marx's method is not that of a mental exercise. 'It is to be discovered in real, concrete relations: it is a method which groups, not a simple "essence" behind the different historical forms, but precisely the many determinations in which "essential differences" are preserved' (MN: 139).

For example, Marx argues that the relation between production and consumption is neither immediate identity, nor mutual dependence, but rather internal connection. In Hall's reading, this internal connection is not an abstract, logical relation but is 'a process in the real world, a process through historical time, each moment of which requires its own determinate conditions, is subject to its own inner laws, and yet is incomplete without the other' (MN: 144). The concept of unity in difference is one of the lessons that cultural studies learned from Althusserian structuralism. Hall writes:

Here, again, it [structuralism] has won a critical insight about Marx's method: one thinks of the complex passages of the 1857 Introduction to the *Grundrisse* where Marx demonstrates how it is possible to think of the 'unity' of a social formation as constructed, not out of identity but out of *difference*. Of course, the stress on difference can – and has – led the structuralisms into a fundamental conceptual heterogeneity, in which all sense of structure and totality is lost. Foucault and other post-Althusserians have taken this devious path into the absolute, not the relative,

autonomy of practices, via their necessary heterogeneity and ‘necessary non-correspondence’. But the emphasis on unity-in-difference, on complex unity – Marx’s concrete as the ‘unity of many determinations’ – can be worked in another, and ultimately more fruitful direction: towards the problematic of relative autonomy and ‘over-determination’, and the study of *articulation*.

(1980b: 68–9; original emphasis)

There are two more issues that we hope to raise by reprinting this essay. The first is Marx’s role in contemporary cultural studies. Marx had lost much of his fashion in cultural studies by the early 1990s. However, Marx still has relevance for cultural studies in many of its manifestations globally, not as a grand narrative but as useful theory and method (cf. Chen, 1996 and, less stridently, Chen, 1998, where he discusses the importance of Marxism in Japan). Marx is still influential in Hall’s own work, though he has never been an orthodox Marxist.<sup>5</sup> Because of space, I simply pose the question of Marx in contemporary cultural studies here.

The second point is to open for discussion the model of critical reading that Hall’s essay exemplifies. It is not just theorization that involves ‘wrestling with the angels’ (Hall, 1992: 280); critical reading does as well. In the case of Hall’s essay, we are actually considering a double reading: of Marx and of Althusser’s appropriation of Marx. Hall reminds us that even as Marx dismantled Ricardo’s political economy (in *Capital*), and rigorously critiqued Hegel (especially in the 1857 *Introduction*), he never ceased learning from them. In struggling with Althusser, Hall is still learning from Althusser even if, in the end, he must reject his reading of Marx. This differentiates Hall’s (and the Centre’s) method of criticism from more absolutist critiques (cf. E. P. Thompson’s anti-Althusserian invective in *The Poverty of Theory*, 1978). As Hall wrote:

The Centre has found it useful to read texts for their underlying ‘problematics’ but has never succumbed to the method of reducing texts to their epistemes and has actively criticized the stigmatization of texts on the sole ground that their problematics can be declared ‘historicist,’ ‘empiricist,’ ‘Lukacsean,’ etc., etc.

(1980a: 281)

Nearly 30 years after its initial publication, Hall’s exemplary reading of Marx still has important things to say to contemporary cultural studies about method, Marx and the practice of critique. On behalf of the editors, it is our privilege to bring this key essay back into print.

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## Notes

- 1 As of summer 2002, the original Stencilled Paper was still available from the Department of Cultural Studies and Sociology at the University of Birmingham for a nominal fee. See <http://www.bham.ac.uk/Cultural-Studies/cccs.html> or contact Department of Cultural Studies and Sociology, University of Birmingham, Birmingham B15 2TT, UK (tel: +44 (0)21 414 6060). Now that the department has been closed, its availability is in question.
- 2 I use this as a term of convenience, recognizing that there was no single 'Centre position'. The delineation of the various positions, especially around this particular issue, would be the subject of a much different essay.
- 3 In a footnote to 'Cultural Studies and the Centre', Hall writes: 'The first appearance of the Nicolaus translation of Marx's *Grundrisse* (Penguin, 1973), with Nicolaus's seminal introduction, was an important event: above all for the highly significant 1857 *Introduction*, Marx's most extensive methodological text, which not only provided a methodological bench-mark but also allowed us to criticize the highly theoreticist epistemology which Althusser and Balibar had culled from it' (1980a: 281–2).
- 4 Sparks actually argues that Althusserian Marxism became 'the orthodoxy of the Birmingham Centre from around 1973' (1996: 82) and cites the issue of *WPCS* in which Hall's essay appeared. Both Hall's subsequent accounts of this era plus the careful work of Hall's reading of the *Introduction* indicate that 'orthodoxy' might be too strong a word here and that Hall was not taking on board Althusser's theory completely but maintained some critical distance.
- 5 'I was never an orthodox Marxist. I'm not one of those people who went into Marxism and lost my faith or changed, etc. I was always drawn to certain questions that Marxism posed' (Hall and Sakai, 1998: 365).

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Editor's note: the following essay appears much as it did in *Working Papers in Cultural Studies*, 6. Obvious typographical errors have been corrected, but everything else, including the reference style, remain in their original form.



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